

VZCZCXR09689
PP RUEHAO
DE RUEHCV #0776/01 0821926
ZNY SSSSS ZZH
P 231926Z MAR 06
FM AMEMBASSY CARACAS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3676
INFO RUCNMEM/EU MEM COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHBO/AMEMBASSY BOGOTA PRIORITY 6188
RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA PRIORITY 5298
RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ PRIORITY 1811
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA PRIORITY 0020
RUEHQH/AMEMBASSY QUITO PRIORITY 1885
RUEHME/AMEMBASSY MEXICO PRIORITY 3637
RUEHOT/AMEMBASSY OTTAWA PRIORITY 0631
RUEHBU/AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES PRIORITY 1091
RUEHSG/AMEMBASSY SANTIAGO PRIORITY 3368
RUEHMU/AMEMBASSY MANAGUA PRIORITY 1085
RUEHDG/AMEMBASSY SANTO DOMINGO PRIORITY 0063
RUEHAO/AMCONSUL CURACAO PRIORITY 0686
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0025
RUEHMI/USOFFICE FRC FT LAUDERDALE PRIORITY 2928
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUMIAAA/HQ USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL PRIORITY
RUEHUB/USINT HAVANA PRIORITY 0585

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 000776

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/21/2026

TAGS: PGOV MOPS MASS VE

SUBJECT: CARRIER VISIT TO BENEFIT US POLICY TOWARD VENEZUELA

REF: CARACAS 00374

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT R. DOWNES FOR 1.4 (D)

Summary

11. (U) See Ambassador's comment para 9.

12. (S) Post supports Southcom's planned "Partnership of the Americas" maritime surge to the Caribbean to be led by the aircraft carrier U.S.S. George Washington. The deployment will help us to counter President Hugo Chavez' courtship of Caribbean countries and his attempts to pit them against the United States. The ship visit will provide benefits to participating nations that offer a stark contrast to the Venezuelan Government's failures to provide concrete help against drug trafficking and to promote sustainable economic development. Finally, the deployment advances U.S. interests by feeding into Chavez' increasingly paranoid behavior and by creating conditions in which the Venezuelan leader could make a mistake. End Summary.

13. (S) Post endorses Southcom's planned "Partnership of the Americas" deployment of the U.S.S. George Washington aircraft carrier group to the Caribbean Sea. Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez has offered discounted oil sales to the Caribbean and has deployed Venezuelan troops in regional humanitarian aid projects in attempts to create a bloc that will support his anti-U.S. stances in the OAS. The carrier visit will help foster goodwill among regional countries by facilitating communication, offering training, and mounting combined operations, and it can aid in undermining Chavez' attempts to drive a wedge between the United States and the region.

14. (S) The Partnership of the Americas initiative offers Venezuela highly visible commercial, military, and humanitarian benefits that contrast sharply with Chavez'

failures to develop his own country.

-- Humanitarian Assistance. The deployment has a humanitarian aid component that will contrast with the BRV's failures to rebuild the coastal state of Vargas since 1999 floods claimed thousands of lives. The comparison of U.S. military assistance to the region to Venezuelan foot-dragging is especially pertinent because the BRV refused U.S. military relief to Vargas. The collapse of the bridge connecting the major artery between Caracas and the international airport in La Guaira on March 19, 2006 will also serve as a visual reminder of Venezuela's neglect of its coastal population while it refuses U.S. assistance.

-- Counternarcotics. The initiative not only includes "counter-narcoterrorism" operations, but the mere presence of the U.S. vessels in the region will also raise costs to drug traffickers by forcing them to alter routes and schedules temporarily. The joint nature of the exercises will portray the benefits of regional solidarity against trafficking in contrast to Venezuela's willful self-exclusion. (Venezuelan drug czar Luis Correa has commented publicly that U.S.- and European-bound drugs--most of which transit the Caribbean--are not Caracas' concern.)

-- Economic Impact of Port Calls. The significant boost to local commerce that accompanies port calls of major U.S. vessels is another angle that can be exploited in Venezuela. Creative public diplomacy will be necessary, however, because Chavez opponents will be slower to catch on to this missed opportunity. Venezuelans are blissfully ignorant of the barriers placed on the tourism industry by Venezuela's

CARACAS 00000776 002 OF 002

political problems, its overvalued currency, and its underdevelopment. The belief that Venezuela's natural wonders will magically attract tourists if advertised enough is prevalent.

FUELING CHAVEZ' PARANOIA

15. (S) Chavez sees conspiracy theories behind most U.S. actions. The involvement of his perceived allies in the region may constrain his ability to paint the deployment as a U.S. invasion. He is likely, however, to paint it as a dry run or an attempt to gather intelligence for a future attack.

Timely notification that the Ambassador will visit the George Washington may contribute to Chavez' paranoia. Planned port calls of the destroyer U.S.S. Stout to Curacao, the cruiser U.S.S. Monterey to Aruba, and the frigate U.S.S. Underwood to Trinidad and Tobago will play a useful role, as well.

16. (S) If Chavez takes the bait, the deployment will expose the international community to apocalyptic statements and Venezuela-centric views of the region that make Chavez appear at best silly and at worst clinically paranoid in the eyes of many observers. He will alienate himself if he publicly suggests participating countries are collaborating in the U.S. military's alleged machinations against him. The deployment is also consistent with Post's broader strategy to force Chavez to react to the USG rather than allowing him to define the bilateral relationship.

17. (S) Making Chavez feel temporarily isolated may provoke additional BRV missteps. Venezuelan diplomats lash out at their foreign counterparts when they are outnumbered on a particular issue. In addition, Chavez has shown an increasing tendency to provoke international leaders other than President Bush when he feels snubbed (REFTEL). Because Chavez fancies himself a regional leader, seeing much of the Caribbean participating in a U.S. military deployment will get his goat.

Comment

18. (S) Post will promote the visit of the carrier group as a routine U.S. military and humanitarian outreach to the region. Nonetheless, the BRV's portrayal of the deployment as evidence of U.S. imperialism will likely be the fallout. If the BRV does not allege the visit as proof of U.S. plans to invade, it will certainly bemoan it as a show of power aimed at intimidating Venezuela. Any Chavez attempts to portray regional states as "colonies" of the empire will further undermine the Bolivarian President's credibility.

19. (S) AMBASSADOR'S ADDITIONAL COMMENT. This is a win-win for us. The Strike Group does its operational training; we advance drug and humanitarian interests in the region; and we give Chavez opportunities to make a mistake by feeding his paranoia. It helps us here if we invite Venezuelan senior officers to visit the GW, and Venezuelan participation in Colombia, Aruba, or Curacao SME's. We do not expect them to accept, but it strengthens our hand to say we invited.

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